Norfolk Local Access Forum – written evidence (NER0041)

Rural advocacy and the Commission for Rural Communities

1. Since the closure of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), and subsequent winding up of the Defra Rural Communities Policy Unit, how – if at all - are the CRC’s original functions of advocate, adviser and watchdog being fulfilled?

From the NLAF member with an Interest in Rural and Economic Affairs:

Norfolk Local Access Forum endorses the view of one of its members who has an interest in Rural and Economic Affairs. She greatly misses the contribution that the CRC (Commission for Rural Communities) made to rural policy, in particular the leadership and dedication that Stuart Burgess their Chair demonstrated and the many publications that were published under its name. It was a highly respected organisation, valued by the rural community and it was a great shame to close it down. The LAF shares her view that NE does not come anywhere near to fulfilling that role in any capacity neither does it make up for the closure of the DEFRA Rural Policies Unit, mainly because it doesn’t appear to have much in the way of leadership and influence as well as being extremely under resourced.

2. Are sufficient measures being taken to ensure that policies are rural-proofed at national and local levels? Who is taking the lead on policy for rural areas – and who should be taking the lead on such matters?

NA

3. What role should Defra – or other Government departments – play in co-ordinating policy for rural areas? How effectively are the interests – including social and economic interests - of rural communities being represented within the current structures of Government, and how could representation and co-ordination be improved?

This review would be an appropriate time to consider the type of replacement programme required to protect rural economic and environmental issues following BREXIT when the Rural Development Programme for England will no longer be in place.

It would be sensible for the departments of BIS, DCLG and DEFRA to get together to look at how a programme of grants specifically aimed at rural areas for both economic and environmental protection could be devised - Natural England may be able to contribute, but we believe it should be specifically a Government political decision whereby Government Departments work together in both rural proofing and decision making on specific rural areas.
Natural England

4. How well has Natural England fulfilled the mandate that it currently has? How well do its wide-ranging functions fit together, and does it have the appropriate powers and resources to perform these functions?

NA

5. Are any changes to the remit and responsibilities of Natural England required, either as a result of Brexit or of other significant developments in the period since 2006?

We support the proposals for agricultural schemes post Brexit concerning Countryside Stewardship:

- Although some of the opportunities offered by the Higher Level Stewardship scheme managed by Natural England have been beneficial, the scheme has some fundamental flaws: the recreational opportunities it funds are only temporary; rules for publicising access opportunities are weak; the access provided did not have to link up to the wider, permanent access rights of way network (and therefore was often of little use to the public); and the quality of routes varied considerably.
- We would like to see a new subsidy system that supports and encourages farmers to deliver public access, ensuring the provision of both local economic benefits and population public health benefits. A major independent study concluded that spending farming subsidy funds on improving access to attractive countryside, protecting wildlife and cutting greenhouse gases could produce annual benefits of over £18billion, for a loss of less than £0.5billion in UK agricultural production.
- We also endorse the call for redevelopment of the subsidy system that provides an opportunity to fund permanent improvements to England’s recreational access infrastructure, boosting rural growth and development and improving public health. Financial support for landowners and managers to both complement existing public access on foot and fund the development of new access could ensure long-lasting economic benefits.
- Funding should be directed towards areas where there is clear demand, e.g. areas for improvement as identified through Rights of Way Improvement Plans or Local Community Plans.
- Investment should be made in existing rights of way and open access network, which may potentially provide more public benefit than providing new routes particularly as local government budget cuts impact on access.
- Permanent access provision should be favoured over temporary, thereby providing maximum benefit for public subsidies as spending on infrastructure is not wasted when the temporary agreement ends.
6. Do the arrangements and provisions for enabling and managing access to the countryside remain appropriate? How effective have Natural England – and other partners – been in promoting better access?

Natural England has not provided support to the Norfolk LAF since the regional coordinator posts were disbanded. The main area where this would have been useful would have been in the preparation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (to be incorporated into our Norfolk Access Improvement Plan), and here there was nothing coming from NE to prompt or assist us including the absence of the funding which was available for the first version. When it did come to guidance, we have only the Defra guidance from 2002, plus the suggestion that we use the recently revised Welsh guidance, but ignore the bits that relate specifically to Wales. We accept that this is more Defra than NE, but saw nothing to suggest that NE was trying to assist LAFs by explaining the position, let alone challenging it or representing LAFs in any way.

Response Coordinated by Sarah Abercrombie NLAF Coordinator on behalf of Martin Sullivan, Chair of Norfolk Local Access Forum

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